

Brave New Reality

By Koen Kleijn

If you, reader, happen to visit a small old museum, Beethoven's birthplace, the Villa di Maser, or Huis Doorn, then no doubt the following thing will have happened to you. You are not only allowed to get in; you get a guided tour by a nice, well-intentioned guide who does not speak English very well, and who actually does not have the foggiest idea about the exhibit, but who tries to turn it into a catching story. This guide shows you the complete inventory, and then halts at a portrait of a respectable old lady wearing jewels, a stony face and a glassy look. The guide will then ask you to have a proper look at the painting – that is the sister of the composer, or the mistress of the first occupant or the dowager great-niece of the Kaiser – but she especially asks this because there is 'something funny' with this painting. At this stage she begins to lower her voice. She says: 'No one knows how it is possible, but her eyes are following you all over the room.' This will sound strange to you, but dammit, it is true! The lady of the portrait gives the visitor the same glassy and straight look at one side of the room as on the other. You find it strange, even a bit sinister. The guide has no explanation for it, but it is clear that the painter must have been a great, great artist. Only two rooms further on you are able to stop shivering.

This makes no sense at all. Paintings are two-dimensional which enables you to observe the surface in almost the same way from all corners of a room. Not the eyes of the old lady were following you: your eyes could just see hers on every spot. That is all. It is an illusion. Ladies on paintings are not real and painters know this. 'This is not a pipe', said Magritte, and that was the truth: it was an image of a pipe. Things are not real. However, some guides rather pretend not to know. They have the stubborn need to tell a good story, although they talk nonsense. And they take advantage of the indomitable propensity of the human brain to see three dimensions where there are only two. We cannot help this. It is an evolutionary characteristic. We keep a weather eye. Behind every tree there may be a tiger. We are wired for reality.

In art history this need of the human brain to see un-real things as real is a theme as old as the hills. All art-historical treatises mention the story of the legendary Greek painters Zeuxis and Parrhasius. They were such skillful painters, that only the two of them were able to determine which of the two was the greater artist. They decided to stage a contest: each one would make the best imaginable painting, and the other would judge it.

Zeuxis painted a bunch of grapes. When he showed it to Parrhasius a pigeon came to peck at them. One-nil for Zeuxis, for the grapes were painted so perfectly, that nature itself fell for it. Zeuxis then called on Parrhasius where he found a painting covered with a curtain. Zeuxis reached out to pull aside the curtain from the painting and found out that the curtain itself was a painting. This made Parrhasius the winner: Zeuxis had to acknowledge that deceiving a painter was of a higher level than cheating a pigeon. This became a classic anecdote, which in later years many a painter loved to use. Gerard Dou, for example, loved to paint a 'real' curtain in his depiction. In those days art lovers were advised to praise the painter when seeing his successful painting like this: 'This is not a painting, this is reality itself; and these people look at the viewer of the painting, with such a natural look that you would swear they were alive!'

Gerard Dou knew very well that reality did not exist, in the arts, just its false imitation. Titian knew it all along, Tintoretto knew it, El Greco was positive about it. It was only in the beginning of the 20th century before artists once and for all threw a stone through the mirror and declared the artwork autonomous. Henri Matisse wrote: 'Painting is the art of articulating the visual plane, whereby decoration and expression converge. In traditional art the visual plane is denied because painters create the illusion of three-dimensional space.' Matisse considered this as completely unnecessary: 'The artist no longer need concern himself with trivial details. That's what photography is for, which

is much better suited for it as well. For us painting has a higher meaning. It allows artists to give expression to their inner visions.'

Since Cézanne, Picasso, Kandinsky and Matisse the artist is free. He does not need to bother about reality any more. The artwork has become an autonomous universe. Naturally, the artist might use reality. It could inspire him, he could adopt familiar elements, for his part he could saw whole pieces off a petrol station or an Oldsmobile and exhibit it, he could preserve sharks and sheep in formaldehyde, but as soon as he touches these objects and replaces them into a gallery, they are no longer a part of reality. They become works of art.

This is a delicate difference, and it is not easy to draw a line between one thing and the other. However, there is an authority which could do this: that is the attendant and, by extension, the police. If you happen to touch the fire extinguisher or the hallstand in the museum, nobody will bother; if you touch the 'artwork' they will. He or she, who says that you are not allowed to touch a certain object, determines it to be an artwork. If you are questioning this, then the police will finally come to arrest you. Not all museum staff has the power to do this, though. In 1973 a work of Joseph Beuys, *Badewanne*, was destroyed in a museum in Wuppertal by two hard-working cleaning women. The artwork, a bathtub with grease marks, plasters and bandage, was taken in hand thoroughly. Everything was spic-and-span. This was a mistake any one could make: they took the bathtub for a real bathtub. They were Zeuxis' pigeons.

The dearly won autonomy of art by Matisse and his contemporaries was not something natural. The relation between art and life has long been a recurrent question in artistic circles, but also in the public domain. Could an artwork really profess to be unrelated to reality? Is his artistic context the artist's only concern? Is this what an artist really wants?

Usually, the discussion gets going as a result of a big fuss over a public artwork, for example Rushdie's *Satanic Verses*, Kellendonk's *Mystical Body*, McCarthy's *Gnome Buttplug*, or the *Geert Wilders Works (2005-2008)* of Jonas Staal. Staal made a series of imitation memorials with photographs of Geert Wilders, candles, and flowers, as if the man from Venlo was killed at an accident (or an attack). The politician then pressed charges against him: the artwork could give someone the idea to kill him, a member of parliament. Wilders believed that the artist wanted to influence reality with his work. He did not judge it in the defined esthetic surrounding, the fiction of the artwork that refers to itself, but in its social context. He had a point: if an artwork wants to be more than an autonomous phenomenon, and assumes to be of social meaning, then it may be judged in this context. By the way, Staal was acquitted.

In society, politics and, sometimes, art criticism, the demand for a stronger artist's commitment becomes louder. Carolien Gehrels, alderwoman for the arts in Amsterdam, called out on artists emphatically to getting actively involved in politics, not as campaigners but as creators of art that wants to affect society. Artists hesitate. That is understandable: by declaring that their work is about reality, they lay themselves open to what Bas Heijne once called 'the hysteria of literalism', the confusion between realism and authenticity.

In the film *Enjoy Poverty* we follow the artist-filmmaker Renzo Martens on a staggering travel around the east of Congo where he makes his way around famine, violence, exploitation, desperation, corruption, etcetera. Renzo Martens presents himself in the documentary while he, almost as a missionary, tries to convince the local population that their poverty is their primary natural resource. If they get to grips with its exploitation, for example, by means of photography, they get to grips with their situation. It is a cynical and absurdist argument, and that is why Martens was sharply criticized. He apparently gave his sarcastic opinion about reality, and the form of his work, a documentary film, enhanced this impression. There is hardly an artwork with so much 'realism' in it. 'And yet', Marten later says in an interview, 'the film is not about Congo. It is about looking, about power relations

between the viewer and the viewed, about who operates the camera, who sets the scene, and who does look at whom and why.' Martens: 'A serious artwork is always conscious of the relation. That has been so since Cézanne. I join this tradition. A serious artwork is self-referential. A serious artwork always is primarily about itself, and only secondly about something else. First of all, a painting should know that it is not a landscape, for instance, but paint on canvas. A serious painting does express this.'

Art used to be appreciated because it offered a possibility to escape the harsh, unpleasant reality to the alternative, fictitious, fantasized reality. Art still has this function – look at the phenomenal success of *Avatar*, in which the ghost of the central figure leaves his broken body to rise again in the tall blue-skinned fine body of the *Na'vi*. It is more than just escapism: millions of anonymous Chinese, Korean or Japanese wage slaves, miserable inhabitants of dismal megacities, truly live when they have entered the *World of Warcraft*. As a human being they are the unhappy cogs in a big machine, as avatar they are free in a higher form of life, a higher consciousness. That is simply beyond true reality.

This escape is important, as long as true reality is concrete and manageable. But that is tailing off. True reality is actually becoming increasingly unreal. Our perceptible environment increasingly becomes a digital one. An increasing part of our daily routine is virtually. Twenty-five per cent of Facebook's profiles are false – and yet we consider them to be our friends. It is not strange that art has to have a higher degree of reality, at the cinema, at the theatre, at the gallery. Art should teach us to know reality again, preferably as a self-explanatory art, which can be experienced without guides, critics or philosophers, without avatars or poltergeists.

It may be practical, or necessary, or inevitably, to include elements of reality into art. There is, for example, a recognizable movement of artists who make research-based art; artworks based on (or part of) research which - to some extent – run according to the rules and methods of science: factual, practical, verifiable, and organizable. The recycling of material, or the upgrading of lost objects saved from the skip, also fits in this itch for reality. The mistake that is lurking, I think, is to think that to create a manageable image of reality, reality has necessarily to be used. There is no need for that. Matisse already said: 'Most painters need direct contact with objects, so they can *feel* they really exist. They are looking for a light from outside to enlighten their inner selves. But the true artist or poet has an inner light at his disposal, which transforms objects to a new world – a living world.'